

The Washington Naval Conference, 1922 (Part 1)

by David Chessum

February 2022 marks the centenary of the signing of the Washington Naval Treaty - a landmark agreement which shaped naval developments, strategies, and programmes for the majority of the interwar period. The Treaty limited naval construction and ensured that *Hood* remained the largest warship in the world throughout the interwar years. An appreciation of the Conference and the Treaty which came out of it is, therefore, key to an understanding of the reputation which *Hood* built during this period and which survives to this day.

The Association is grateful to naval historian David Chessum for this article, based on his PhD thesis, which traces the background to the conference and some of the principal outcomes. Here, in part one, Chris examines events which led to the calling of the conference. Parts two and three will follow in the Summer and Winter editions of *The Chough*.

By the outbreak of World War One the US Navy ranked third in the world behind the British Empire and Germany, and the US had continued producing battleships during the war, laying down a further six in 1915-17. In 1916 an expansion programme including sixteen new capital ships intended to provide the US with a navy 'second to none' was authorised, but the entry of the US into World War One in 1917 forced a temporary hiatus in capital ship building so that the US could focus its shipbuilding resources on the production of smaller vessels to meet the then critical threat posed by German unrestricted submarine warfare. Work on the capital ship program recommenced after the armistice, with all sixteen capital ships of the original 1916 programme commenced by mid-1921

Japanese naval policy at the time reflected the strategic and economic realities Japan faced. As an island nation, Japan lacked the depth to retreat from an invading foe on land and required a navy capable of meeting and destroying any hostile expeditionary force at sea. Japan also required a navy capable of ensuring access to critical markets on the Asian mainland. The importance of a powerful Navy was reflected in a steady growth in the Statutory Strength of the Japanese Navy, as shown in Table 1

Japan had enjoyed the benefits of a wartime economic boom, but this came to an end in 1921. As Naval expenditure on the scale needed to build and support the 8-8 fleet consisting of eight battleships and eight

battle cruisers¹ was no longer economically sustainable,² it had been accepted prior to the WNC that the 8-8 fleet was impossible to realise and that Japan needed an excuse to abandon it³.

Table 1: Statutory Strength of the Japanese Fleet

Budget	Battleships				Armoured Cruisers/ Battle Cruisers			
	P-D	D	S-D	16"	P-D	D	S-D	16"
FY08	2	2			4			
FY12			4				4	
FY17			4	4			2	2
FY18			4	4			2	4
FY20				8				8

Key: P-D = Pre-Dreadnought, D = Dreadnought, S-D = Super Dreadnought, 16" = 16-inch gunned Super Dreadnought.

Note that under the FY20 programme, some of the 16-inch ships may have been armed with 18-inch guns. K Ono, 2014, *The 8-8 Fleet Plan - Its Concept and Financial Affordability*, Naval and Maritime Power in Two World Wars Conference, Greenwich, 11 April 2014.

The neutralisation of the German and Austro-Hungarian fleets at the end of World War One had left the British Empire in a commanding position as shown in Table 2. Notwithstanding the obsolescence of many of the older British ships, the large margin of superiority over foreign navies was clear, and the primary British foreign policy objective was to "keep what we have and live in peace⁴."

Table 2: Capital Ship Strengths – November 1918

Country	Battleships Built	Battleships Building	Battle Cruisers Built	Battle Cruisers Building
British Emp.	33	0	9	4
US	16	4	0	0
Japan	5	2	4	0
France	7	5	0	0
Italy	5	1	0	0

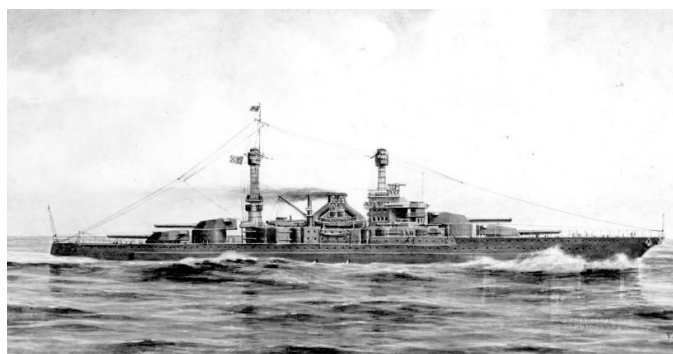
But by the end of 1920 the situation for the British Empire had changed drastically. The battle cruiser *Hood* had been completed; but her three sisters were cancelled on 17 March 1919⁶. The battleship *Canada*, purchased from Chile during the war had been sold back to the Chileans, and six other battleships and battle cruisers had been stricken. No new ships were planned or building, and of the remaining ships in service eight were only armed with 12-inch guns and were of limited value. Table 3 summarises the new situation for the three principal naval powers at the end of 1920, but what this table fails to emphasise is the extent to which the new Japanese and American ships outclassed their

British equivalents. The American *South Dakota* class, six of which had been laid down, displaced 43,200 tons and were to be armed with twelve 16-inch guns, whereas the largest British battleships were only 31,000 tons, armed with eight 15-inch guns, and had been laid down before World War One.

Table 3: Capital Ship Strengths – December 1920⁷

Country	Battle Ships Built	Battle ships Building	Battle Cruisers Built	Battle Cruisers Building	Total Capital Ships Built & Building
British Emp.	28	0	8	0	36
United States	18	10	0	4	32
Japan	6	3	4	2	15

It was clear that the British policy of disarmament by example (or neglect) was failing, and that Britain's supremacy at sea would soon be eclipsed unless action was taken. Britain could no longer ignore the qualitative differences between the new ships building in Japan and the US, and her own ships. In the Naval Shipbuilding Committee, Churchill argued for four new battleships to be built each year for the next four or five years⁸ and in 1921 Britain finally ordered four G3 class battle cruisers, with plans to follow this with four N3 class battleships armed with 18-inch guns in 1922. [Ed.: An article comparing these ships with *Hood* will appear in a future edition of *The Chough*.] The cost of these eight ships, together with new or converted aircraft carriers, totalled £84 million, but the Admiralty's case was so sound in strategic terms that the prospects of it being funded were good.⁹



An artist's impression of the proposed U.S "South Dakota" Class Battleships

The arms race between the three major naval powers was escalating, but the Governments in both the US and Britain were reluctant to fund the projected building programmes. In the US support for a continuing US naval build-up had evaporated by 1920¹⁰ and the Senate cut back naval appropriations and called on the

President to convene a conference to negotiate a naval disarmament treaty. The new Harding administration was now faced with a Senate unwilling to fund the existing programme¹¹, and the realisation that both Japan and Britain were now building or planning vessels superior to the US vessels laid down under the 1916 programme. The administration therefore initiated a conference on the limitation of armament to be held in Washington from 21 November 1921 to 6 February 1922.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 - The number of capital ships indicated in the statutory authority related to ships that were under-age (assessed as being less than eight years old). An unwritten assumption was that ships more than eight years old would be retained as a second-tier reserve, providing for a wartime fleet considerably larger than the number of ships authorised. In addition to capital ships, the 8-8 fleet also included 22 light cruisers, 77 destroyers, and 80 submarines, along with complementary auxiliary vessels including aircraft carriers, tankers and mine warfare vessels etc. Ley to Alston, 11 Mar 1920, DBFP Series 1, Vol. 6, pp1037-8.
- 2 - S Asada, 2006, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, pp 57-58. H Lengerer, 2020, *The Eight-Eight Fleet and the Tosa Trials*, Warship, 42, pp31-32. K Ono, 2014, *The 8-8 Fleet Plan - Its Concept and Financial Affordability*, Naval and Maritime Power in Two World Wars Conference, Greenwich, 11 Apr 2014.
- 3 - H Agawa, 1979, *The Reluctant Admiral*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, p28. S Asada, 2006, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, pp57-58. EP Hoyt, 2001, *Japan's War*, Cooper Square Press, New York, p54.
- 4 - Foreign Office Memo, n.d. (Apr 1926), DBFP, Series 1A, Vol. 1, p846.
- 5 - A Preston, 1972, *Battleships of World War I*, Galahad, New York
- 6 - Anderson to Cammell Laird, 17 Mar 1919, Wirral Archives Service, File GP84.
- 7 - A Preston, 1972, *Battleships of World War I*, Galahad, New York.
- 8 - D Van der Vat, 2001, *Standard of Power*, Pimlico, London, p142.
- 9 - PM Kennedy, 1983, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, MacMillan, London & Basingstoke, p274.
- 10 - PP O'Brien, *Politics, Arms Control and US Naval Development in the Interwar Period*, in PP O'Brien (ed), 2001, *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, Frank Cass, London & Portland, p151.
- 11 - Secretary of State Hughes later admitted that the US could not have built all the ships authorised. O Parkes, 1970, *British Battleships*, Seeley Service & Co, London, p651.

In part two of his article, David will move on to consider the conference itself and the issues which were considered at it.